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## Hip 'Hoods: Midtown Alley is rockin'

By Diane Toroian Keaggy

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

03/05/2010

'Midtown what?' Someone apparently forgot to tell gallery owner Giuseppe Pirone that his neighborhood recently adopted the name Midtown Alley.

"Is that what they're calling it?" asked Pirone, who moved the Nu-Art Series to 2936 Locust Street in 2006. "I've never heard that term."

You may not know the name either, but chances are you've visited the narrow strip of Midtown between Olive and Locust streets. If you've eaten brisket at Pappy's Smokehouse, checked out the vintage motorcycles at the Moto Museum or grooved to hip hop DJs at EXO nightclub, you've hit Midtown Alley.

"We're by SLU and Harris Stowe, we're by Grand Center, we're in the Locust Business District," said developer Jassen Johnson of Renaissance Development Associates. "There was this amazing renaissance happening here, but we didn't know how to talk about it."

Fortunately, the neighborhood's earliest settlers included a dozen advertising and marketing firms and commercial photographers. They recently created the brand Midtown Alley, a name they hope will one day carry the same cache as "the Loop" and "the Grove."

"They could see beyond the boarded-up buildings," Johnson said. "Creative people often are the ones who are willing to take the leap. We got them together to figure out how to market this thing. TOKY Branding and Design came up with an idea that pays homage to the neighborhood's automotive history as well as conveys that we are a bit more edgy. We never want to be that completely polished sort of neighborhood."



Known in the 1920s as Auto Row, Midtown Alley once boasted showrooms for Packard, Stutz, Moon and other carmakers. Those businesses were long gone by the time Johnson noticed the neighborhood on his commute to East St. Louis, where he worked on community-development projects. An architect, Johnson decided to get his master's in business administration. His thesis was a business plan for the neighborhood.

### Video tour of Midtown Alley



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- **Vito's Pizzeria:** 3515 Lindell Boulevard, 314-534-8486, vitostl.com

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"The people here wondered what the hell this white kid was thinking," said Johnson, 31. "I just started knocking on doors. I would tell people, 'This is where I'd like to see this neighborhood go.' People were like, 'Uh, good luck with that.'"

That was about seven years ago. Today, Johnson has completed his 37th building. Other developers also finished projects. First came the creative agencies, then apartments and lofts, followed by restaurants.

Next, Johnson hopes to attract small retail shops and "healthy living" businesses like a yoga studio and bike store. Another microbrewery, Urban Chestnut Brewing Co., is scheduled to debut this summer, and Moto Museum founder and architect Steve Smith plans to open a boutique hotel.

Midtown Alley also will host the Midtown Alley Grand Prix bicycle race in June and the second annual Moto Fest in September.

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Still, the neighborhood struggles with crime and inconsiderate partygoers, just like Washington Avenue did in its early years. In December, a shooting outside the Karma nightclub injured a security guard and clubgoer. And New residents complain that noisy clubgoers litter and tie up traffic.

"This neighborhood isn't perfect, but it has changed so much," said Zach Smith of the Moto Museum. "The Number 1 way to reduce crime is to have more foot traffic, and that is starting to happen. We've got big plans for this area. I cannot stress how awesome it will be."

**Moto Museum**  
**3441 Olive Street**  
**themotomuseum.com or 314-446-1805**

**The neighborhood's automotive heritage was one reason why Steve Smith and his son Zach opened the Moto Museum in Midtown Alley. But what really intrigued the pair was its proximity to Grand Center's premier art museums.**

**"I don't care what anybody says, motorcycles are art," Zach Smith said. "We display them as art. The design, the history — there is so much to learn. A lot of these companies were mom and pop operations with passion, creativity and skills."**

**The Moto Museum opened in 2007 and features 100 rare and vintage European bikes. Admission is free. The Moto Museum also features a special-events space for parties and weddings and is adjacent to Triumph Grill, also owned by Steve Smith.**

**"You can go anywhere and see a Harley, but where else can you see a Vespa with a sidecar?" asked Zach Smith. "Every bike here as a unique story."**

**Steve Smith, an architect and co-founder of Lawrence Group, started his romance with motorcycles before he was old enough to drive.**

**Zach Smith is not a motorcyclist, but admires their engineering.**

**"There are a lot of cars in the world but there are far more manufacturers of motorcycles," he said. Think about it — you can't build a car in your house. The motorcycle is smaller, it's lighter, it's cheaper. After World War II, while Americans were buying cars, motorcycles were thriving in Europe."**

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**Like fine art, the bikes at the Moto Museum are strictly hands-off. But a 1935 Flying Squirrel is harder to resist than an Ellsworth Kelly.**

"It can get frustrating. We have signs all over the place, but I guess some people can't read," Smith said with a laugh. "We could rope them off, but the whole point is to get up and close."

**Anatomy of Style**  
3001 Locust Street  
anatomyofstyle.com

**Randi Barnard imagines she is the rare dressmaker who used the GI Bill to pay for a fashion degree.**

"I was a crew chief on a cargo plane, so I did general maintenance, changing tires and brakes," said Barnard, 27, who studied fashion design at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale. "When we went out at night, we would get all dolled up and have fun with what we wore because we were in uniforms all day. All the men would joke that I needed to get with the government and make new uniforms."

**Barnard and her partner, Jason Erfling, opened their boutique this week. Erfling picked Midtown Alley for the cheap rent and the chance to build a neighborhood from scratch.**

"Ten years ago, I did the same thing when I bought a house in Benton Park," Erfling said. "I could see the possibility there, and I feel the same energy here. You can tell people are really invested in the neighborhood."

**Keeping the name of the shop's predecessor, Anatomy of Style will feature Barnard's custom-designed and off-the-rack cocktail dresses as well as fashions from national designers. Barnard also hopes to showcase local jewelry makers and art.**

**Combining vintage styles with modern details, her dresses are fun, flattering and a little sexy.**

"I love very intricate fabrics, and I feel with a cocktail dress you can do a lot more with embellishments," Barnard said. "Cocktail dresses can be a little out there."

**Buffalo Brewing Co.**  
3100 Olive Street  
buffalobrewingstl.com or 314-534-2337

**What's the best beer name at Buffalo Brewing Co.? Easy: Buffalo Drool, a malty American brown ale.**

**But the best beer? That's tough. Buffalo Brewing Co. serves only small batches of unique, flavorful ales. A batch may stay on tap for two to three weeks before the brewers introduce a new brew. A popular chili beer didn't even last a week.**

"Freshness and variety is important to us," brewer Paul Stelmach said. "At home, we'll try out different grains, different hops. We'll bring it in and tweak it. Fortunately, I haven't had any disasters here, but at home — yes."

**Owner Dushan Manjencich is not a beer geek, but after running 10**



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restaurants, including the beloved Mike & Min's in Soulard, he knows what he likes. He hired three homebrewers and gave them free reign over the restaurant's small in-house brewery.

"If they come up with an idea, we go with it," Manjencich said. "It's like boys and their toys. They went from making a 5-gallon batch to brewing for us a 100-gallon batch. I trust them completely."

Buffalo Brewing serves enormous portions of pub classics, many made from bison. There's buffalo burgers, chili, pizza, meatloaf and — Manjencich's favorite — buffalo bangers and mash. The desserts are made in-house and are freakishly large. The good news is that buffalo meat has less cholesterol and saturated fat than beef, so you can indulge in that one-pound piece of carrot cake.

"You can do a lot with bison," Manjencich said. "It think it will take time for people to catch on to buffalo meat, but it's delicious. It tastes like beef."

**The Nu-Art Series at the Metropolitan Gallery**

**2936 Locust Street**

**<http://www.fubarstl.com> >fubarstl.com or 314-289-9050**

**Kids today just don't know to behave in a mosh pit. But Fubar manager Steve Tindall is happy to offer a tutorial.**

"The moshing back then, everyone was jumping up and down and everyone went in a flow," Tindall said. "Today, things have changed. They swing fists and they kick. We put a stop to it. We tell them, 'Do it again and you're gone.' We want kids to have fun and enjoy the show."

Fubar opened in 2008 and brings in local and touring punk, metal and rock bands. After the demise of the Creepy Crawl, Fubar emerged as the top venue for minors, who dig the club's gritty feel, cheap covers and multiband bills. Upcoming shows include Plainview tonight, Copperview on March 12 and Cubic Zirconia on March 13.

Parents like that the venue is nonsmoking and segregates kids from drinking patrons.

"Parents can feel safe picking up their kids off the sidewalk after a show," Tindall said.

The venue also has shows for aging music lovers, such as veteran punk acts Agent Orange and Fear and indie bands Sponge and Marcy Playground.

Along with nearby Firebird, Fubar has turned Midtown Alley into the top destination to catch emerging alternative acts.

"This is a rock 'n' roll space, nothing sleek about it," Tindall said. "I was going to shows when I was 14 years old. My parents would drop me off at Mississippi Nights or the old Bernard's Pub. I remember how great it was to see music in a cool place for the first time. It's cool that my son's friends get that here."

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**edward schlogl** March 4, 2010 1:28PM CST

I really enjoyed the story on Mid-Town Alley, it reminded me of when my dad would take me down to the area from Jennings on business in the 40s & 50s. The Veiled Prophet parade went down Olive St., I believe from around STLU. I will send a letter to be published. Thanks for the memories, Ed Schlogl Hazelwood Mo.



**cuspat** March 4, 2010 2:20PM CST

I recently took my grandkids to Powell Hall (for the Bugs Bunny concert) and told them that the area used to be known as "Midtown" when I was a kid. They didn't believe me! I now have proof. Thanks.

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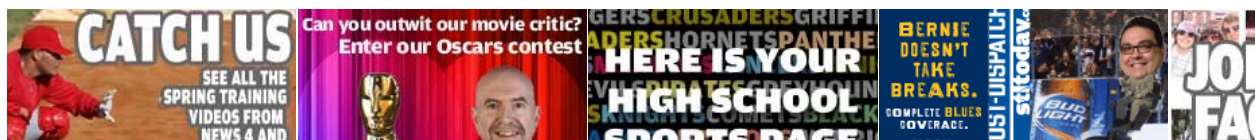
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